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General Assembly

Official Records

Disarmament Commission

257th meeting

Monday, 5 April 2004, 10 a.m.

New York

Chairman: Mr. Adamia ..... (Georgia)

The meeting was called to order at 10.15 a.m.

Opening of the session

The Chairman: I declare open the 2004 substantive session of the Disarmament Commission.

Allow me at the outset, on behalf of all members of the Commission, to extend my sincere gratitude to Mr. Jian Chen, Under-Secretary-General for the Department of General Assembly and Conference Management, which is responsible for servicing the Disarmament Commission, and to Mr. Nobuyasu Abe, Under-Secretary-General of the Department for Disarmament Affairs, which will provide substantive support for this session of the Commission. The presence of Mr. Abe, a widely respected diplomat, once again underlines the importance of the Disarmament Commission in general and the high expectations of Member States from this session in particular.

Adoption of the agenda

The Chairman: Members of the Commission may recall that, at our organizational meeting held in November 2003, the Commission formally adopted the provisional agenda. At this meeting, therefore, the Commission will not take any action but will simply take note of document A/CN.10/L.55.

Statement by the Chairman

The Chairman: I should like to begin today by thanking all representatives for the honour accorded me of serving as their Chairman for this session of the Disarmament Commission. I deeply appreciate the confidence that they have placed in me and wish to say at the outset that I will fulfil my responsibilities to the very best of my ability.

The Commission is now entering its fifty-second year of deliberations on issues of disarmament — vitally important issues that rank among the most difficult on the agenda of international peace and security. Though many of the efforts in this field have yet to achieve their goals, this in no way reflects badly upon the Commission. Obstacles to progress surely have far deeper roots in the different national security interests and perceptions of Member States, unresolved regional tensions, ongoing improvements in weapons technologies, and so on.

Despite the slow rate of progress in disarmament, our predecessors on the Commission were nevertheless able to reach a consensus on many useful guidelines and recommendations in past years, including those agreed in 1999 with respect to nuclear-weapon-free zones and conventional arms control.

In that light, I call upon all delegations to work together in a positive and constructive spirit to seek some inspiration from past achievements of the Commission.

A revitalized effort is needed precisely because these are difficult times for disarmament. Our deliberations are taking place in an environment marked by persisting national stockpiles of weapons of

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mass destruction, ongoing efforts to acquire such weapons or to market their components, growing military expenditures, and even some erosion of the basic principle of the peaceful resolution of disputes. All of this only adds to a general atmosphere in which progress is limited. Some observers are wondering if agreed disarmament goals will ever be achieved, while others have focused their concerns on the lack of activities within the framework of the United Nations disarmament machinery.

We all are aware, for example, that the Commission did not meet for a substantive session in 2002, the year of its fiftieth anniversary; that it was unable to reach a consensus last year on the nuclear and conventional arms issues on its agenda; and that it is having great difficulties in reaching a consensus on a substantive agenda for its current session.

In the First Committee, many resolutions — especially those dealing with nuclear disarmament — remain the subject of deeply divided votes, and the Conference on Disarmament is continuing its multiyear effort to reach a consensus on a substantive programme of work.

Meanwhile, we continue to witness some disturbing developments relating to weapons of mass destruction, reports of rising military expenditures, transfers of deadly weaponry and illicit technology. Overshadowing all these concerns is the increasing threat of terrorism and the growing public fear that weapons of mass destruction might be used by non-State actors. We must also recognize the existence of an issue relating to the readiness or ability of some Member States to comply with their relevant treaty obligations, and persisting questions as to the ability of multilateral verification mechanisms to detect non-compliance.

As troubling as these circumstances may be, it is precisely in such times that the Disarmament Commission has its most important contributions to make in the larger process of creating and strengthening the global norms of disarmament. If the world were in blissful harmony on all matters relating to disarmament, there would scarcely be a need for the Commission. Our debates and discussions — both inside and outside this room — play an indispensable role in laying a foundation for concrete progress elsewhere in the United Nations disarmament machinery.

Let us not, therefore, underestimate the strength of this Commission — its purely deliberative function, its mandate to focus intensively on a restricted set of issues, and, of course, its universal membership. If we begin our deliberations shortly and sustain them in a spirit of goodwill and mutual respect, we will have performed a great service to disarmament, to the United Nations, and to people everywhere who understand that progress in disarmament is truly essential for international peace and security.

Please accept my best wishes as you commence your work today and my commitment to assist you in any way I can to bring our deliberations to a successful conclusion.

Election of remaining officers

The Chairman: Let me turn to item 3 of our agenda, which concerns the organization of work, including the election of the officers. We shall proceed with the election of the two remaining members of the Bureau.

As delegates remember, the Commission must still elect a Rapporteur and one Vice-Chairman from the Group of Western European and Other States. I wish to inform the Commission that that Group has successfully completed its nominating process, and we now have candidates for both remaining posts. The Group has nominated Ms. Philomena Murnaghan of Ireland as Vice-Chairperson and Mr. Meir Itzchaki of Israel as the Rapporteur.

If I hear no objection, I shall take it that the Commission wishes to elect Ms. Philomena Murnaghan as Vice-Chairperson of the Commission and Mr. Meir Itzchaki as the Rapporteur.

It was so decided.

The Chairman: Allow me, on behalf of the Commission, to warmly congratulate the newly elected members of the Bureau and to wish them success in discharging their duties. I am sure that they will make an important contribution to the smooth working of the Commission this year.

Having completed some aspects of the organization of work, I give the floor to the Under-Secretary-General for Disarmament Affairs, Mr. Nobuyasu Abe.

Statement by the Under-Secretary-General for Disarmament Affairs

Mr. Abe (Under-Secretary-General for Disarmament Affairs): Given the uncertainty shrouding the Commission's work ahead, I am not sure if I should do this, but let me begin by congratulating you, Mr. Chairman, upon your election and by pledging that the Department for Disarmament Affairs will provide its full cooperation and substantive support for your efforts throughout this session.

I also wish to express my appreciation to the former Chairman, Ambassador Mario Maiolini, and the Chairmen of the previous session's working groups, Mr. Alaa Issa and Santiago Mourão, for their many efforts to reach a consensus on the two items on last year's agenda: "Ways and means to achieve nuclear disarmament" and "Practical confidence-building measures in the field of conventional arms". Though consensus proved elusive, they deserve the respect of all members of the Commission for their dedicated work to advance that agreed agenda.

Since the Commission's creation in January 1952, its work has been shaped by the political will of its members and other dynamic forces arising both from within individual Member States and from the relations between such States. In its ongoing efforts to build a new consensus on various disarmament guidelines and recommendations, the Commission must therefore steer a steady course between shared concerns and common hopes.

The world today faces many new and persistent concerns. The 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks heightened concerns about the acquisition by terrorists of weapons of mass destruction. The war in Iraq was fought over issues related to weapons of mass destruction. There are many stories of suspicions, revelations and compliance concerning the development of such weapons. Also, reports continue to come in daily of tragic casualties from small arms and light weapons around the world.

Meanwhile, concerns persist about the continued presence of arsenals of weapons of mass destruction and the renewal of doctrines concerning them. There is frequent talk about the crisis of the multilateral system for disarmament, arms control and non-proliferation.

I think the correct response to all these concerns lies not in discarding the multilateral system or collective international efforts but in increasing joint efforts to strengthen the multilateral system of international peace and security, including the system for disarmament, arms control and non-proliferation. Given the urgency of all these questions, we cannot be complacent — and the Disarmament Commission is no exception.

I therefore strongly hope that the Commission will come up with a good, relevant agenda for this session and will engage in meaningful and productive discussions during the coming weeks. The world is waiting for the Commission to come up with the correct answers to the urgent questions we are facing.

The Secretariat and I stand ready to assist the Commission in every way we may in the Commission's endeavour to achieve its goal.

Organization of work

The Chairman: On behalf of the Bureau, let me make some general observations and say a few words about our future work. As we have decided during the preceding informal consultations, in the absence of agreement on two substantive agenda items — or maybe three; that is for delegations to decide — the Commission will not hold a general debate. Instead, we will shortly adjourn this meeting, and we will continue our deliberations in an informal mode with a view to reaching consensus on the substantive agenda some time during this week or, at the latest, next Monday. In that case, we will proceed with the rest of the session as scheduled, which means two weeks of, hopefully, intensive and intellectually rewarding deliberations.

However, if it proves impossible to get an early agreement on substantive agenda items, we can take a decision on the further course of action. Here, we have several options available, which are well known to the delegations.

With these brief remarks, I open the floor to the delegations wishing to make comments or statements.

Mr. Rachmianto (Indonesia): My delegation is taking the floor on behalf of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). NAM would like to take this opportunity to thank you, Sir, and the members of your Bureau, and to express its appreciation for your continued efforts throughout these weeks to try to resolve the stalemate surrounding the Disarmament Committee agenda items. We remain hopeful that if we

adjourn these meetings and continue with informal consultations, the positive spirit that has been shown in the last few days will remain.

The Disarmament Commission was established as the only deliberative body with the function of considering and making recommendations on various issues in the field of disarmament. While the Commission has these functions, NAM is cognizant of the changing environment that resists disarmament in general. As the international community continues to face increasing and serious questions on how to address non-proliferation, disarmament and arms control issues, as well as the increasing threat of terrorism and the possible use of weapons of mass destruction, the United Nations, through the Disarmament Commission, remains the only forum where all Member States can deliberate on the concept of common security during these turbulent times. It is important, therefore, not to allow this forum to follow the demise of other disarmament bodies, like the Conference on Disarmament.

Throughout these weeks of consultations, NAM has remained positive and flexible in order to safeguard these principles, on which the Disarmament Commission was established. NAM has consistently maintained that the issue of nuclear disarmament remains its priority, consistent with General Assembly decision 52/492. We appeal to our colleagues and counterparts to show the same flexibility during these consultations so that we can come up with agenda items that will accommodate all our concerns. NAM has gone the extra mile to try to accommodate and take into consideration the concerns of our counterparts. We believe that it is time that they show the same flexibility.

The Chairman: I thank the representative of Indonesia for his statement made in a constructive spirit.

I see no one wishing to speak. I plan, with advice from delegations, to suspend the meeting and to start informal consultations. The question I would like to put here is whether we could start informal consultations today, this afternoon, or maybe tomorrow morning. What are the suggestions of delegations?

Mr. Ogawa (Japan): You, Sir, suggested suspending the meeting and convening informal consultations this afternoon or even tomorrow. But I think we have the budget and resources of the Disarmament Commission, which will last three weeks. We would like to make maximum use of those resources for fruitful deliberations. So I propose that we commence immediately after the suspension of the plenary meeting.

The Chairman: I totally agree with that. If delegations are ready to start informal discussions immediately, we will start them immediately upon suspending the formal meeting.

If I see no objection, I suspend the meeting with the understanding that we immediately start informal consultations.

The meeting was suspended at 10.45 a.m. and was resumed at 4.50 p.m.

The Chairman: The 257th meeting is now resumed. The Commission will meet again in formal session tomorrow morning.

The meeting rose at 4.53 p.m.